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Lucy Brown: “secrets she keeps from herself”

Abstract:

I interviewed Lucy Brown in 2015, in what had been her Brighton studio for fourteen years. She showed me around, explaining the mixture of creatives at what she called a “really flexible” place - a couple of painters, a jewellery worker, somebody working in ceramics. But no, they weren’t a collective, they were independent... Although Brown’s studio space was open to the rest of the building, in that it was without a door or a lock, I got the strong impression that singularity of existence, a protected and preserved privacy in practice, was Lucy Brown’s essential condition. This is the resultant essay from that meeting, in which I was compelled by Lucy Brown and her practice as “the real thing”, with her living within, though and for her work, consumed and compelled in equal measure by it. In a reference, I commended her as “a serious, committed and talented creator”, for whom reflective practice as well as the outcomes of that practice was integral to the authentic, critical and measured work that she articulated via an authentic engagement with materials, their meanings, and the underpinning narrative that formed her artistic obsessions.

Keywords:

spider – woven – embodied – female – vintage – intimate

Main Text:

I interviewed Lucy Brown in 2015, in what had been her Brighton studio for fourteen years. She showed me around, explaining the mixture of creatives at what she called a “really flexible” place - a couple of painters, a jewellery worker, somebody working in ceramics. But no, they weren’t a collective, they were independent... Although Brown’s studio space was open to the rest of the building, in that it was without a door or a lock, I got the strong impression that singularity of existence, a protected and preserved privacy in practice, was Lucy Brown’s essential condition.

Later, Brown admits to “feeling quite jealous of other people’s practices, because they just seem to be a lot easier to do, more straightforward, and more, not necessarily commercial, but with more of a pathway for them”. Brown describes her own practice as process and material based, the construction of woven sculptural installations and “anti-form sculptures” using vintage, second hand and discarded clothing, and the exploration of narratives around boundaries, re-invention, body absence and presence, space, femaleness and craft-labour [1].

I’ve been aware of Lucy Brown’s work for many years, encountering it in galleries, on the web, and in print a good number of times. I’ve been intrigued by a combination of what I fairly rarely come across: the work is captivating of course, but there is also a sense that the artist herself is “the real thing”, living within, though and for her work, consumed and compelled in equal measure by it. In a reference, I commended her as “a serious, committed and talented creator”, for whom reflective practice as well as the outcomes of that practice was integral to the authentic, critical and measured work that she articulated via an authentic engagement with materials, their meanings, and the underpinning narrative that formed her artistic obsessions.

In Autumn 2015, Brown sat in the middle of her soon-to-be-vacated studio like a spider at the very nerve-centre of her woven web, and between the two of us, we began to spin... Spin the studio space. Spin the living space. Spin the gallery space. Spin the loom space. Spin the body space. Spin

Tilda Swinton asleep in *The Maybe* at the Serpentine (1995). Spin the artist. Spin Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) [2]. Spin the studio space. Spin Louise Bourgeois' *Arch of Hysteria* (1993), the small Elastoplast pink fabric figure dangling rigid and contorted in space. Spin the loom space. Spin Lucy Brown, awake and spinning tales, texts and textiles. This is where the work is spun, this is where the work is born, this is where the work is born out of.

...because the clothing is worn...so that idea of wearing a space...you need to do something to the space, because when you take your work to a gallery space it's clinical and you don't know it. To sleep somewhere would make it a bit more like home' [3].

Brown's cocoon-like, womb-like, haven-like, cavern-like echo-chamber of a studio had been constructed around her, by her, a tangle of personal mythologies, matter and stuff, the arachnology of a spider-woman. Here, she channels the heritage, histories and her-stories of women weavers of myths – audacious Arachne, weaver turned spider, destined by punishment to spin webs forever; raped Philomena, silenced by cutting out her tongue, weaving her unspoken trauma into her tapestry; faithful Penelope, warp-weft-ing her shroud by day, unpicking it by night; and labyrinthine Ariadne, guiding her lover with a red flannel thread... These, and other, mythic sisters echo in Brown's work, whispering their secrets kept, hearts broken, punitive and chastising, linking and dislocating, the wonders and woes of women, leading and loving, working and way-finding...

Intricate webs, narrative entanglements, intricacies and intimacies, form a pliable studio around her, as mobile as the clothing she draws upon to construct her works, as vulnerable as her skin membranes, as connected as her frayed nerves, and as nomadic as the bundles carried across centuries and continents by those seek meaning and truth.

Brown nourishes, fosters, coaxes her work into life, acknowledging it is not easy, not comfortable. Her practice is demanding of time and physical space, and is pressured by the challenges of everyday life. Her demeanour is stoical and poignant. She admits to making her art discontinuously, seeking out when it is right to make, when she believes she can, when she feels the work makes sense, has sense. She seeks affirmation with her eyes that I know what she means to say, that she has made sense. She doubles back, challenging her own articulation:

When I say make, I mean physically make; but I do other things that are towards making something. That includes collecting stuff, gathering information, reading, writing in connection with the clothing and materials, and responding to a collection of materials, fabric as well as clothing as well as texts.

I respond to Brown that I understand her commitment to this long-term project, that I know such a practice will have periods of physical making, periods of thinking, periods of reflection, periods of activity and inactivity, and a multitude of processes that keep it underway. She relaxes a little, and makes her confession:

Because it can be a struggle to maintain the motivation sometimes I go through stages where I think – that's it, I'm going to pack it all in. The extreme: nothing is right and nothing's making any sense. But that thought of just closing the whole studio down and having no contact with materials, I find quite dark and quite empty.

It's something that I need to do, it's something that I do want to push and take as far as it will go. It's a way of making sense of why we're here, making sense of who we

are as human beings, and why are we doing the things that we do. It's making sense of an individual life as well as the whole universe...

This self-doubt, and its co-location with certainty that there is something worth pursuing, evidences Brown's maturity and effectiveness as an artist. She strives, seeks, searches for meaning and meaningfulness. She cannot imagine not doing this, while seemingly yearning occasionally for it to cease. Her installation, *the secrets we keep from ourselves...* (2012-15) demonstrates the compulsion that will not speak its name.

Commissioned in the first instance for the *Lace Works* exhibition at Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery (2012/13), and worked on subsequently, *secrets...* stretched across space, constructed to inhabit over forty square metres, its warp hand-dyed Nottingham Lace and off-white lace trim, both manufactured locally, and supplemented by garment seams, ribbon and bias binding. Across that is weft of vintage and second-hand machine-made lace-detailed negligées, petticoats, a dress, and pins. Some garments are intact, entrapped in the lace and ribbon web. Others are sheared, stripped and rewoven, all are fragmented, taut and looped in space.

Brown's works – including *The Bride's Clothes*, *Petti-fur-coat*, *Intimate Foundations*, *S-t-r-e-t-c-h*, *Indecent Exposure*, *Squeeze* and *Total Support* – rely on suspension and tension in their installation, conjuring in their forms some sense of the flayed or the crucified, seemingly at odds with the innocuous, flimsy, and apparently ineffectual materials adopted. Seeking clues to this apparent contradiction of affect, we discussed the titling of the work. Titles, Brown informed me, emerge from conversations and casual exchanges, family stories and folk memories, her own thoughts and feelings about the garments she uses, remembrances of those who wore them, and those who didn't. She writes during the times she makes, tries on and selects clothing, cuts and weaves, describing a multi-layered, material, performative and textual practice, that distils into something captured, enshrined, imbued and – ultimately – titled:

I very rarely start with a title for a piece of work. It will generally come out of it...it's an experience of the soul and the body becoming one, when things gel, in that space – the making makes sense that you're bringing something together that only happens at that time.

Brown's imaginative reference point for this installation, however, is the photographic record of Nottingham lace factory women workers at their duties. Through archive images, she describes considering the collective bodies of these women, and their assumption of a submissive and obedient formation, heads bowed, shoulders and skirts touching, seated and patient, almost still, their fingers checking and mending flaws in the lace, containers of the harmed, unspeakable and taboo. There are embodied meanings at play in these photographs that Brown is wholly conscious of: they represent "successful womanliness", the so-called "feminine virtues" of thrift, diligence and domesticity, and the fragmentary feminist forms of articulation and artistry. The evocative resonance of the lace garments selected by Brown pierces the surface of the photograph, rendering its cool documentation *messy* with its subjects as feminine, their labour as repetitive and obsessive, their hysteria and desire palpable.

Brown tells me that "like most textile connected people", the memories embedded in her works concern her family, and she speaks of "nans and grandfathers and my mum" and how she "developed a love for clothing very early on":

- *mum would make all of her own clothes, all of my clothes, all of her friends' clothes, all of my dad's trousers; any leftovers would be clothes for my dolls.*

- *dad's dad was an upholsterer for British Rail, worked in carriage works...*
- *...nan, mum's mum, used to work for soft furnishing companies and department stores, as well as knitting for all the grandchildren, knitting school jumpers; it was just something that happened, there was nothing about it...*
- *Nanny Brown (dad's mum) would go into British Home Stores and buy me matching vest and knickers that would have an animal on the front...she loved doing embroidery, she'd sit and do embroidery on whatever, sheets or anything that came around...*

This is a fine textile pedigree, that has nourished a fine textile sensibility. Brown continued: everything in her childhood home would be clothed “in a loving way really as well as a practical need”; her mum had a cache of clothes she never gave away, but she did give Brown her own and her nan's wedding dresses; and Brown dressed up, and dressed her dolls up in them, when she was little.

Clearly, Brown's relationship with her mother is fundamental and formative: she described a kind of non-verbal textile dialogue that threaded back and forth between them, and an intensely tender protectiveness for her mother that she considers “quite special”. Garments are concealed between them: tucked away, held onto and saved, hoarded and treasured, folded and pressed, privately preserved as hidden clothing caches, and potentially evil-averting, damage-avoiding, trauma-deflecting, talismanic bundles:

We would sit for hours looking through fabrics. My mum's got suitcases of fabrics. She's only got a little house but she fits a lot in it. We will just sit and look. We don't talk; we just show. That's always been, right from a very early stage, that exchange.

A significant punctuating moment in that ritualised relationship came when Brown's mother handed over a particular bag of “stuff”, containing clothes she had made by hand as well as nighties, petticoats, negligees, her nan's girdles, stockings and underwear. Brown's slow unpacking of that bag, her trust or faith in her own intuitive ability to make work out of what she found, and the concurrent inspiration drawn from the seminal *Conceptual Clothing* exhibition and publication [4], informed the development of her creative practice:

...the underwear was the intimacy, a very private garment, something you don't see in the public domain, so I was interested in that private and public space. And I was interested in traces onto the clothing, like bodily fluids and bits of hair; anything that was left...underwear picks that up very well because it's next to the skin obviously.

And it just screams female at you; it's very gendered...you can't ignore that's what underwear does, it gives that label automatically. Enjoy the materials; enjoy the clothing; enjoy dressing up in them; enjoy playing and exploring them.

We teased out the aesthetic and materiality of the garments that compelled Brown: the nylon, frills, lace, fake fur, the popularised glamour and cute titillation of – for example – *Diana Dors*, the *Carry On* films, the phenomenon of the *Wonderbra* advertisement, and how the formed foot and shaped calf of a nylon stocking epitomised erotic excitement:

...very British, very English...kind of a saucy, naughty side to them...from a time when people were a bit more naïve in some respects, not so 'tell all' as now.

Everything you're not meant to like about nylon I like. The colours are very female, of a particular era...there's almost like a dream, or a fantasy for everybody, not just for certain selected people.

I like the way they're constructed: the labels, the trims, the sizing which differs from one shop, one brand, to another; they generate characters. Everybody wears clothes so there's constantly a conversation to be had...quite a seduction goes on.

Brown creates her pieces on a large static upright frame, the simplest of loom, acting as a holding device for the development of the works. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) impacted her thinking on how she was both cutting her garments, and also cutting her pieces from the loom. She could see the potential violence of the unique act of making the cut, and linked that with breaking down, deconstructing, representations of the female body as defined by the garment. That moment of cut seems to create some kind of sweet spot for Brown, the interface between one state of being and the next. On cutting, the erect falls to flaccid, rigid becomes flexible, hard goes soft, the dominant submits. The loom-supported garment/piece, that is the stretched and splayed body of work, created in the studio, splits apart, and becomes pliable and collapsed. The inter-relationship of loom and textiles ends, liberating the work to begin its next incarnation as a series of gallery installed elements requiring some further orchestration.

Kate Stoddart has acknowledged how doubt and uncertainty surround the "cutting" aspect of Brown's work, yet its experimental dimension – the risk of the permanent transformation that cut will drive – enables Brown to consider work as ongoing, in progress, unfinished, and therefore open to refreshment through re-construction, re-purpose and re-interpretation [5]:

I was very keen on getting people to look at the work before it was cut off the loom. For me it was important to see that transformation between the loom and the gallery space.

Brown has intimated that she resists having her work labelled as feminist. Her reason is not an objection to feminist practice *per se*, but rather that she feels she hasn't got a strong sense of "voice" in relation to what that label seems to demand. And she is less than clear as to where her work sits in relation to the practices of more overtly feminist artists, who seem to augment their art practice with a type of theorising, justifying, and conceptualising that she does not relate to. She does state that she "would like to make people think, think about themselves, think about themselves in relation to others, and maybe think about the history of women", and I reflect back that her practice is perhaps more intuitive, more halting, more reflective than a particular type of polemic she is *perceiving* as the only form of feminist art. Indeed, Brown has subsequently confirmed that what she wanted to articulate was that feminist discourse was not the only "activist" motivation in her work, and that she hesitated with typecasting her work as solely feminist as she saw her practice as multi- rather than single-layered in terms of meaning, agency and action.

Looking at her titles, and the narratives supporting the creation of her works, I see hallmarks of work concerned with both maternal lineage *and* decadent discourse. I see seduction, intimacy and pleasure, and of course their near neighbour, the abject. The detumescent nylon stocking, once erotic, now discarded on the floor is one such abject textile. Its lived experience begins to conjure a discourse that certainly passes my feminist litmus test:

With Diana Dors the thing that got me with it was her husband burning all her clothes when she died. And then he fell into depression. The fact that he just burnt all of her clothes: how can you just burn somebody's clothes? That mournful act.

My great-grandma, who fled leaving her (possibly) first child with her own mum... she was already pregnant with her second child out of wedlock...she had three boys that are known of, all different fathers...there were a lot of shamed closed doors when I tried to find out...

And more...in response to the new availability of the birth control pill in 1962 (but only to married women, of course), Brown uses a vintage girdle elastic, suspender ends, and a size 18 1960s Northern Irish Moygashel “Strelitz” dress to question how much control women really did have over their bodies in the sixties. The work’s overall red colouration exudes drama, danger, sex appeal, glamour and politics, enabling Brown to explore the identity, sexuality and ownership of the female body through her own individualised means of storytelling. The work has a defiance and spirit that forms its own type of polemic, that is refreshing, irreverent, cheeky and dynamic.

Offerings (2012-13; 2015; current) too epitomises what I contend is a further feminist practice. In this complex and malleable work, elements embody women’s traditional shame, vulnerability and passivity, exactly those conditions that feminism is concerned to dispel. In the *Bit of Skirt* section, a response is made to the derogatory comments that sexualise and objectify women, reducing them solely to a “bit” (partial) and a feminine garment (that can be lifted, looked up, felt under). In *Try not to breathe*, pieces of garments that reference a woman’s neck and chest evoke the breathlessness, suffocation, strangulation and/or ecstasy that is located in this delicate and vulnerable part of female anatomy. In the *Waiting for you to...* part of *Offerings*, attendance, reliance or dependency is articulated, with clear view of and reference to a wide-open, knee-height, vulva or deep throat, waiting to receive...

Lucy Brown really is that rare “real thing”. Her work integrates with her existence, fundamentally and personally. Her creative sensibility is in the dust motes of that studio space, connected right at the beginning, right at the centre of it. Her work sits demurely alongside the grand epic scope and scale of contemporary art practice, feminist or otherwise. Her hands are folded, her eyes downwards, her mind brooding, and her spider’s heart is knowing...

Acknowledgement:

Thanks to artist Lucy Brown. As an addendum to this interview and creation of this text, Lucy Brown confirmed my imagining of her as arachnoid, operating through fine and delicate membranes, both material and conceptual, like a spider in her beloved Robertson Yard, Brighton studio. There, spiders lived abundantly, in fecundity and harmony. One, Sophia, was – as Brown described her – a “shiny hard black bodied, pointed and pinned spinner”, making her dense and undisturbed web in the roof window above Brown’s loom. Woman-weaver and arachno-artist wove and watched, and watched and wove, and wove and waited, until Sophie spawned her brood of miniatures suspended over one’s loom and within the other’s web. Guarding fiercely as a spider-mother should, Sophie woke to find her off-spring dead, and Brown returned to find Sophie dead, hanging dead, by her own thread. Taking Sophia and her mass of dead babies, Brown buried them in the ground of Robertson Yard, leaving a little piece of her own arachno-sensibility in that place. Brown reports with sadness that no spiders reside in her present shared studio...

References:

- [1] <https://lucybrownmakes.wordpress.com>
- [2] All references to other artists or individuals were made by Lucy Brown during our interview, Autumn 2015.
- [3] All quotations are from the author's interview with Lucy Brown, Autumn 2015.
- [4] *Conceptual Clothing*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1987.
- [5] www.a-n.co.uk/interface/reviews/single/2540206

Figure captions:

- 1) *Waiting for you to...*
Offerings series; 2012; 2015
Photographers credit – Mary Stark
- 2) *Bit of Skirt ... (detail)*
Offerings series; 2012
Photographers credit – Mary Stark
- 3) *Try not to breathe (detail)*
Offerings series; 2012; 2013
Photographers credit – Mary Stark
- 4) *The secrets we keep from ourselves (overview)*
2012-2015
Installed at Nottingham Castle Museum. Lace Works Exhibition 2012/13
Photographers credit – John Hartley
- 5) *The secrets we keep from ourselves (detail)*
2012-2015
Installed at Nottingham Castle Museum. Lace Works Exhibition 2012/13
Photographers credit – John Hartley
- 6) *Petti-fur-coat (foreground) 1999*
Squeeze (background) 1999
Installed in a bedroom at Newstead Abbey, the ancestral home of Lord Byron and thought to be Byron's Bedroom. The Dreaming House Exhibition 2015
Photographers credit - John Hartley
- 7) *In 1962 the birth control pill was available...*
Installed in Artist Studio. 2012
Photographers Credit – Lucy Brown

Author's biographical note:

Catherine Harper is Deputy Vice-Chancellor at University of Chichester, UK. A visual artist before turning to writing, Catherine's sculpture, performance and public arts practice has been exhibited in the UK, Ireland, and internationally from North America to Japan, and she has been Artist-in-Residence at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Canadian Banff Centre for the Arts, Finland's Nordiskt Konstcentrum, and the National Museum of Prague. Her work is held in many private and

public collections, including those of the Irish Government, the UK's National Health Service Trust, and the Tyrone Guthrie Centre. As Professor of Textiles, she holds a PhD in Composite Textile Engineering (Ulster, supported by Ford Motors), and has been Editor-in-Chief of the Routledge journal *TEXTILE: Cloth & Culture* for over a decade. Currently developing a monograph titled *Oestrogen Rising: Stained and Bloodied Cloths of Ireland*, Catherine's previous monograph was *Intersex* (Berg, 2007), and she has published most recently on clothing, erotic intimacy and masculine mourning in Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle's *Erotic Cloth* (2017) and in Taylor & Francis' *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* (2016). She is author/editor of the four-volume *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources* (Bloomsbury, 2012), and currently in receipt of funding from the Marc Fitch Trust and the Society of Antiquaries, London.